

[Harlem Swing Club]

Belief and Customs - Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK 10 Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER VIVIAN MORRIS

ADDRESS 225 W. 130th St. NYC

DATE January 17, 1939

SUBJECT THE HARLEM SWING CLUB

1. Date and time of interview Jan. 8th. 1939 - 11:30 PM/1:30 AM
2. Place of interview 41 W. 124th St. NYC
3. Name and address of informant
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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The Harlem Swing Club is hold every Sunday night on the ground floor of the building at 41 W. 124th Street. The hall is spacious, with chairs along the side for people to sit and watch who do not wish to dance. Bright decorations of red and green crepe paper have been used to [?] help create a festive appearance, and on the nightw night when I attended the Club, there were various posters on the walls saying “CELEBRATE THE FREEDOM OF TOM MOONEY” etc. On the wall, directly back of where the musicians are seated, was a placard labelled “A BLUEPRINT FOR DEMOCRACY”. Other decorations were the drawings made by children who attended attend the Neighborhood Children's Center held in this Hall daily.

The “Harlem Swing Club” gives a dance and “Jam Session” every Sunday night during the Winter season, in this hall. The musicians who provide the excellent “swing” music are all members of Local 802, American Federation of Musicians—and the people who attend the Club regularly are of all types and ages, the majority being young Negro girls and boys who love to dance the “Lindy, the “Tutti Fruitti” and the “Big Apple”. Because the price of admission is very reasonable, they come here Sunday after Sunday, and forget their problems, their tedious jobs or lack of jobs, in the joy of dancing to the rythmic beat of drums, the muted trumpets and wailing saxophones.

The Club is now in the its third year of existence, and is growing steadily more popular and more widely known. Lovers of “swing” music, intellectuals from Park Avenue and Greenwich Village, well-known band leaders and musicians, frequently drop in to listen to the music and watch the dancers. The atmosphere is friendly—anyone is welcome who behaves properly. Best of all, it provides an evening of happy entertainment for the young people of the neighborhood, both white and Negro—they dance tirelessly, number after number, from 10 p.m. until 2 a.m., when the Swing Club closes its doors.

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NEW YORK

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 West 130th Street, NYC

DATE January 17, 1939

SUBJECT THE HARLEM SWING CLUB

The Harlem Swing Club is located in a stately white building at 41 West 124th Street, Mount Morris Park North. It is a place where Negro and white workers congregate and have a bit of Sunday night pleasure by resorting to the terpsichorean art or relaxing in the chairs lining the walls and delving deeply into these serious economic and political crises that are staring us in the face today. Because tomorrow, those who are fortunate begin paying their pound of flesh, for which they will at the end-of the week receive a pittance that will keep the dispossess away for a few days longer. They realize that it's dog eat dog and notwithstanding the seemingly carefree air of the people who make up the Swing Club, one feels that the smiles are artificial; the brains behind them are restless, seeking solution to the unfair tangled state of things.

The dancers glide over the cozy hall with an agile tread and seem to feel the spine-tingling music which the Swing Club orchestra 2 sends forth. One notices the ease with which the individuals in the orchestra handle their instruments, the finesse with which the piano player coaxes the tones from his piano. Some of the greatest musicians of our day are before you - the personnel of the "Harlem Swing Club Band" are men from the great name bands of national and international fame. The men drop in and play a while and if they have other engagements they leave and join their band; but if they have the night off they

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usually spend the evening at the Swing Club where there is such a friendly tone in the surroundings that anyone feels at ease.

The band plays some torrid swing music and a little brown man, a scant four feet tall, proves to be the most phenomenal untiring dancer on the floor. His partner is a young lady, with an engaging personality, who tops him in height about four inches. The little man dances with abandon. He runs the gamut of the latest swing crazes; the perspiration sticks to his back but he doesn't let up.

A pretty girl, with an aquiline nose, joins hands with her tall, loose-jointed partner and they give a dance exhibition with such scintillating ease that it gives the impression that anyone could emulate them.

The room becomes warm and smoke congested as the music ceases and the dancers find seats or drift toward the walls and stand earnestly talking in little groups.

A brawny man, with a booming voice, walks to the center of the floor and asks for silence. With flowing adjectives and tremor in his voice he introduces a speaker whose greatness and worth to the 3 working class could not be bared with all of the superlatives in the English language. He is a living martyr. Who? Angelo Herndon.

There is ear-splitting applause! Herndon is an idol of the working man. He's the fearless Negro youth who was remanded to the Atlanta Georgia chain gang, for life; he dared to interfere with the shameless infringements by southern law enforcers, on the Constitutional rights of Negro and white workers.

Herndon appealed to the Georgia Supreme Court, but it broadly winked at justice and upheld the Atlanta court's decision. But Herndon was not to be so easily daunted - he appealed to the Supreme Law of the land. The Supreme Court saw the joker in the case and said, "Free Herndon."

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Herndon is a clean-out, soft spoken Negro, who incessantly puffs on a cigarette. His physique doesn't lead one to believe that he could stand the physical and mental brutalities which were heaped upon him. A man's heart must be elephantine in proportion for him to calmly state, in the face of almost certain death, as Herndon did while in that filth-ridden prison in Georgia, "I am not one, I am millions; if they kill me, a million more will rise in my place." He's a man.

Herndon's speech is about another martyr— Tom Mooney. Mooney was released from a California prison yesterday, after serving over twentytwo years on a trumped up charge. Those two men have something in common — Angelo and Tom. Herndon modestly spent his speech extolling the amount of courage and spirit it took Tom Mooney to come through his 4 experiences so physically sound and mentally alert and abreast of the political and economic trend of the outside world. Herndon's speech was short but packed with dynamite. He was cheered to the echo.

Wait! Wait! The powerful voice introduces some other heroes. Some of the American lads who served in the Loyalist lines in Spain are in our midst. Let's give them a hand. They are men, every one of them.

Give a moment's silence for the boys who did not return from Spain. Silence.

The music began and the dancers resumed dancing; I slipped out of the Harlem Swing Club feeling pleasantly surprised. I did not see the usual collection of light-brained, swing-crazed American youth. Meeting such a serious-minded group caused the cockles of my heart to throb in ecstasy.